

Improving Vermont's Child Welfare and Youth Justice Data Systems

HHS / HEDI

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Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate (OCYFA)



Agenda

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- III. Why are Data Systems Crucial in Child Welfare?
- IV. A New Approach to Vermont's Child Welfare Data Systems
- V. Recommendations for New Systems
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I. Introduction: What is the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate (OCYFA)?

- We are an independent, non-partisan, state office that engages in individual and systemic advocacy on behalf of children, youth, and families served by DCF, with an emphasis on child welfare and youth justice.
- We are charged with examining systems as a whole and articulating youth-centered systemic reforms that also benefit government.
- “The Office shall: ... provide systemic information concerning child, youth, and family welfare to the public, the Governor, State agencies, legislators, and others, as necessary.” 33 VSA § 3203(5)
- OCYFA “may publicly disclose any patterns of conduct or repeated incidents” if likely to “mitigate a risk posed to the health, safety, and welfare of a child or youth.” 33 VSA § 3209(c)

Introduction: Framing the Issue

“Treating software as just another commodity overlooks the fact that mission-critical software cannot simply be bought the way you buy a truck or even a building. It’s an integral part of the service you provide, and that service and the environment in which it operates are dynamic.”

- Jennifer Pahlka, *Recoding America: Why Government Is Failing in the Digital Age and How We Can Do Better*

“Your existing system is an enormous asset, not an albatross”

– United States Digital Response, after analysis of Vermont DCF’s current child welfare data systems

Introduction: Systems, Not People

- DCF and ADS workers did a great job restoring systems as fast as possible, including working after hours and on weekends.
- If we apply a deficit frame to this outage and focus on who to blame, we will miss the steps necessary to improve these critical systems.
- A transparent picture of Vermont's child welfare data systems is essential to achieving the goals of child safety, youth independence, and family autonomy.

II: Scope of the Outage

Screenshot from December 18, 2025

The screenshot shows the FSDNet application interface. The top navigation bar includes links for Dashboard, Case Notes, Intake, Master Index, CAN Registry, Reports, Health, CaseWorks, and Youthful Offender Tracking. The user is logged in as Matthew Bernstein. A sidebar on the left provides links for Misc (Change email, Change password, Change preferences), User (Logout), Release Notes (Latest Changes), and Help (HELP!). The main content area features a prominent red-bordered box containing a **System Alert**: "System Alert: Due to an ongoing SSMIS outage, FSDNet only has access to SSMIS data as of **12/15/2025 at 7am**. You may continue to use FSDNet and the AHS RC, but please note that recent changes made in SSMIS will not be reflected here." Below this alert, a "Client Search" section is visible, with fields for Family Number, First Name, and Last Name, and a "Submit" button. A note at the bottom of the search section says, "Use Ctrl-f to search for a name, or part of a name. Clients shown in red have active alerts in case notes".

FSDNET
Vermont Department for Children and Families

User: Matthew Bernstein

Misc:
Change email
Change password
Change preferences

User:
Logout

Release Notes:
Latest Changes

HELP!

System Alert: Due to an ongoing SSMIS outage, FSDNet only has access to SSMIS data as of **12/15/2025 at 7am**. You may continue to use FSDNet and the AHS RC, but please note that recent changes made in SSMIS will not be reflected here.

Welcome To The New Family Services Division Net!

Client Search

Search Criteria

Family Number:

OR

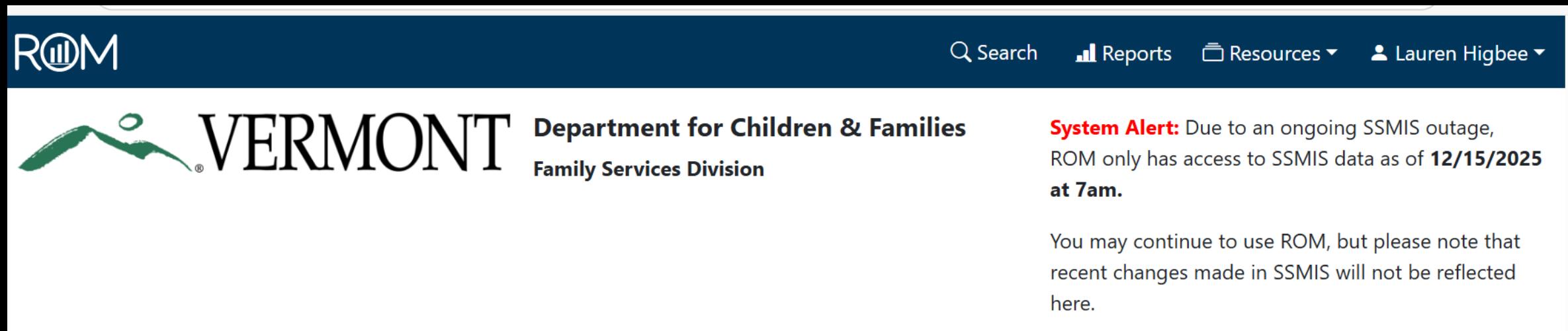
First Name: Last Name:

Submit

Use Ctrl-f to search for a name, or part of a name.
Clients shown in red have active alerts in case notes

Scope of the Outage

Screenshot: January 20, 2026:



The screenshot shows a website with a dark blue header. On the left is the ROM logo (R in a circle with three bars) and the word "VERMONT" with a green mountain icon. In the center, it says "Department for Children & Families" and "Family Services Division". On the right, there are links for "Search", "Reports", "Resources", and a user profile for "Lauren Higbee". A red "System Alert" box is overlaid on the page, containing text about an ongoing SSMIS outage.

System Alert: Due to an ongoing SSMIS outage, ROM only has access to SSMIS data as of **12/15/2025 at 7am**. You may continue to use ROM, but please note that recent changes made in SSMIS will not be reflected here.

Scope of the Outage

- For at least three days, critical DCF FSD digital systems catastrophically failed.
- “We don’t know which youth are in DCF custody.” DCF email, 12/16/25
- If there had been a youth crisis during that time, especially after hours, the lack of digital access could have been the difference between life and death for children for whom the State of Vermont is the legal parent.
- It appears that no notification of the outage was sent to foster parents.
- During this time, there was also no access to the child protection registry. Employers depend on this system to indicate whether prospective employees have been substantiated for abuse or neglect.
- There were additional effects of this outage, including DCF’s inability to notify workers about children missing from custody, potential data loss, and many hours of manual data entry. The full effects are unknown.

III. Why Are Digital Systems Critical For Families in Child Welfare?

- DCF digital systems are a primary driver of outcomes in Vermont's child protection and youth justice systems, for both families and workers.
- For families: Vermont's child welfare data systems are inadequate to support data-driven initiatives, like keeping children with kin, constructing preventive youth justice services, and reducing Vermont's reliance on congregate care settings.

Why Are Digital Systems Critical For DCF Workers in Child Welfare?

- Caseload v. workload. National study: “Only 20 to 35 percent of a caseworker’s time is spent on direct contact with their clients.”
- In 2023, DCF team members spent more than 400 hours on FSDNet and SSMIS system maintenance work, such as creating requirements to add/change functionality in FSDNet and SSMIS, testing issues/new work in FSDNet and SSMIS, and working with ADS Developers regarding issues, additions, or changes within the system.
- That’s about 1.8 hours each day to maintain legacy systems and does not include other basic data tasks, such as those required by federal regulations.

Why Are Digital Systems Critical For DCF Workers in Child Welfare?

- “Burned out caseworkers can create data errors and deliver subpar service due to inadequate investigations and inconsistent case monitoring. In addition to the detrimental costs this creates for foster youth, burnout can also harm agencies, creating other costs such as high turnover, lower staff morale, and lower productivity.”
 - Maddy Dwyer, “[Fostering Responsible Tech Use Balancing the Benefits and Risks Among Public Child Welfare Agencies](#),” Center for Democracy and Technology, May 2024.

DCF Workers: 2023 OCYFA Survey Responses

- “There has been talk for years that SSMIS will be replaced, which has ultimately led to many newer workers not becoming as familiar as more seasoned workers were forced to back in the day when it was the only system available. FSDNet has led to significant reliance on that system, which results in workers feeling confident in what they found in FSDNet, when the reality is that it is not a complete picture without pairing it with the information in SSMIS.”
- “SSMIS crashed a few years ago and admin had to reenter everything from, I believe, a weeks worth of work entered. I believe there is now a back up.”
- “There is no way to search a particular person within SSMIS, it is based on family numbers, so if workers miss a family number, they also miss potential danger. There are many individuals that are listed under multiple family numbers and it often requires an extensive search in order to be able to complete Risk Assessments appropriately. It would be very beneficial if there was a way to search SSMIS based on name and DOB, or develop a new updated system.”

IV. A New Approach to Vermont's Child Welfare Data Systems

- As we debate how to create the next generation of child welfare data systems, we should ask ourselves these fundamental questions:
 - What are the goals of Vermont's child protection and youth justice systems?
 - How do we know if we are achieving those goals?
 - How can we adjust our practice if not?
- Each goal we identify should have one or more "key performance indicators" that measure progress towards that goal.
- Our digital systems should be designed to realize these goals and should have the flexibility to adjust the goals and metrics as necessary.
- Without this clarity of purpose, Vermont won't be able to build digital systems that truly work for families and workers.

Project Scope Matters

Cost <i>millions</i>	< \$0.5	\$0.5-3	\$3-6	\$6-10	> \$10
Success	68%	22%	18%	13%	2%

V. Recommendations for New Systems

- Ensure that Vermont has a goals-based plan for our child welfare data systems.
- Recognize and act on the urgency that this outage presents by fixing SSMIS now rather than waiting for CCWIS.
- Treat FSD's data system as critical infrastructure that requires constant iterative improvement rather than as a single project with specific start and end dates.
- Revamp and overhaul Vermont's current child welfare data systems rather than discarding them and starting from scratch. Recognize that the State's ownership of its current systems, and its hosting on Azure, are huge assets.
- Start small with a project that addresses one of the major pain points of the current system—such as IV-E eligibility, facility monitoring, or financial reporting—rather than engaging in full system replacement.

Recommendations for New Systems

- Recognize and put a dollar value on the full effects on workers and families of our current systems.
- Consult subject matter experts like front-line workers, supervisors, children in foster care, parents, foster parents, and community providers, *before* beginning the RFP / project development process.
- Avoid contracts with the big vendors, who have a troubling track record (see sources).
- Ensure that the State of Vermont owns all aspects of the new system, and that it has consistent access to all system data in formats that are transferable across platforms, so that the State can change vendors if necessary.

VI. Sources and Citations

- Maddy Dwyer, “[Fostering Responsible Tech Use Balancing the Benefits and Risks Among Public Child Welfare Agencies](#),” Center for Democracy and Technology, May 2024.
- Todd Feathers, “[Judge Rules \\$400 Million Algorithmic System Illegally Denied Thousands of People’s Medicaid Benefits](#),” August 29, 2024, Gizmodo.
- Samantha Liss and Rachana Pradhan, “[Errors in Deloitte-Run Medicaid Systems Can Cost Millions and Take Years To Fix](#),” 2024KFF Health News, September 5, 2024.
- Chart courtesy of USDR, 18F/GSA. Data from Standish Group. See also Brookings (Niam Yaraghi), “[Doomed: Challenges and solutions to government IT projects](#),” August 25, 2015.
- [State of Vermont 2025 Performance Report](#)

Contact Information

- Website: childadvocate.vermont.gov
- Email:
 - Matthew.Bernstein@Vermont.gov
 - Lauren.Higbee@Vermont.gov
- Individual Requests for Assistance:
 - 802-828-2828 (leave a message)
 - OCYFA@vermont.gov (shared mailbox)
 - Text to 802-312-1010

Thank you